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ABSTRACT

The ideal foreign language business course would be a cooperative effort between the business school and the foreign language department, prepare students for any of the five proficiency levels in the French Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris test, be designed for the American working in France, and have a balanced international trade perspective. Certain inherent weaknesses can limit its success, including flawed or obsolete texts, blind adherence to the text design, and traditional foreign language teachers' lack of preparedness for business language instruction. Syllabus redesign can occur in three ways: greatly reduced emphasis on certain areas, such as geography, insurance, postal and telephone services, taxes, and the subway, political parties, news media, and culture not clearly related to business practices; more extensive coverage in other areas, including advertising, marketing, banking (systems, practices, and vocabulary), bureaucracy and its role, public and business community mentalities, the European Community, customs duties, the economic orientations of the union of the Right and the Socialists, the relationship of capitalism and legislation, and written and oral practice; and additions to the syllabus, including consumer behavior, labor-management relations, and the French labor movement. Appropriate ancillary materials are plentiful but must be sought out. (MSE)

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DOES THE COMMERCIAL FRENCH SYLLABUS REFLECT THE SITUATION IN FRANCE?

A RE-EVALUATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR COURSE DESIGN

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Does the Commercial French Syllabus Reflect the Actual Situation in France?: A Re-Evaluation and Suggestions for Course Design

This study is based on clearly-defined postulates. First, the ideal situation in foreign language business courses is to have a cooperative program between the business school and the foreign language department. When this is not the case, everyone loses: business school, language department and particularly the student. But a lack of interdisciplinary cooperation hardly justifies the position that foreign language departments cannot do it. They can; they must continue to move forward, and alone if necessary.

Second, in French, this includes preparation for any of the five levels of the proficiency testing of the Chambre de Commerce et d'industrie de Paris (CCIP).[1] Third, because of the vast possibilities which exist in France for an American trained in French business practice, these comments are specifically intended for the American who will be working in France. Many of the remarks, however, are not language-specific and will be applicable, servatis servandis, to all commercial FL courses. Fourth, any consideration of international trade must be put into a balanced perspective. There are weaknesses in the French business community. But a more serious weakness exists among American international traders: the enormous failure the recognize the necessity in the 20th century of foreign language competence in commerce. In her 1983-84 study of 300 U.S.-based multinational corporations, Inman found that nearly one-quarter of the responding companies provided neither training nor

nor orientation to employees who would work abroad.[2]

The first objective of this discussion is actually a sequel to the basic postulates. Until such time as the FL department can convince its colleagues in other disciplines of what is lost--more precisely, of what students are deprived--it should keep its expectations high but realistic and should keep its own house in order. A hoped-for spin-off of this consideration is to bring other schools knocking on FL department doors. The business community, including that in academia, will buy a product once convinced of its worth. Success stories influence academic boardroom decisions. But a commercial FL course will not attract attention until certain inherent weaknesses are corrected.

The most noticeable of these is the serious flaw in Business French texts. The rapidly-changing business world often makes them obsolete before they appear in college bookstores. Another built-in weakness in the Business French course stems from the tendency to let the text design the syllabus, even if commercial FL instructors are not alone in accepting without demur a course's content and priorities. Problems resulting from text obsolescence are compounded when the commercial FL instructor treats the material as though it were in a sort of Holy of Holies. What harm is there in calling into question a text's content, emphases, direction or all of these? Quality control leads to an improved product.

Despite this position on Business French texts, we must have them. In actual fact, the problem of text-obsolescence is logistic, that which one finds more frequently in the natural sciences than in the humanities. Finel-Honigman notes that

> (i)n banking, finance or technology, entire sets of facts, forms, methods and policies can undergo radical changes in one year. In 1981, after the Socialist election in France and the

> advent of nationalization, new rules, regulations, and changes in accounting procedures came into effect.[3]

She points out that the demands for constant and immediate change in business are new for those in disciplines where shifts occur much more slowly (Finel-Honigman, 30). What she says of the instructor applies a fortiori to texts, to which months and often years are devoted for preparation. The problem is resolved by using a particular text as the course's major sourcebook and, to offset the negative effects of the course manual's time-lapse, by incorporating the most recent ancillary materials into the course text.

Another weakness in commercial FL courses arises from the educational formation of the instructors. Coming largely from humanities backgrounds, they are either unprepared or feel unprepared to tread upon the businessperson's turf. This also has a deleterious effect in syllabus design in that such instructors become particularly overdependent on the course text and, because of insecurity, lose their enthusiasm for and creativity in teaching a commercial FL course.

The second objective follows from the first: the instructor who re-evaluates the text and incorporates up-to-date ancillary materials will put the material in a realistic context; that is, he will redesign the syllabus. Inherent weaknesses will be obviated; the Business French course will be strengthened. The final objective is to examine whether a humanities-trained instructor interlopes when teaching a commercial FL course or, on the contrary, provides a much needed service to the students, the business community and even one's country.

To obtain these objectives, I shall offer slight syllabus modifications, precisions on ancillary-materials development as well as suggestions for becoming more conversant with business concepts, practice and the mentality of the business community.

Regarding syllabus modifications, there are three categories: one urging

vastly reduced emphasis on instruction in certain areas; a second, a discussion of areas which could receive more extensive coverage; and a third, areas which should be added to the syllabus.

In the area which I see as non-essential for a Business French course, the list is hardly exhaustive; moreover, as the title of this study indicates, these items are presented more as suggestions, as prolegomena. Specific topics are cited here which (1) can often be overdiscussed, (2) have no direct relationship with Business French, (3) despite their importance, are areas better covered in culture, civilization or even grammar courses in the United States and (4) are easily and quickly learned once one arrives in France. It is granted that the student must at some point become conversant with all the items in this category. It would be grand were a Business French instructor able to include them while doing justice to the students and the course. This is particularly so in those areas tested by the CCIP examinations, but it is a matter of available time.

Thus, I seriously wonder about devoting even portions of classes to geography and geographical subdivisions in France, insurance, les P. et T., taxes, some translation exercises and particularly the Métro. In addition, I question the wisdom of spending valuable class time not only on political parties and the news media but also on that which is enjoying a pedagogical "freedom of the city": culture. Regarding political parties, this implies their exclusion neither in general comments on the French Left, Center and Right nor in remarks on labor-management relations. Apart from noting the political orientations of French radio, television and the major newspapers, there is little to be gained from overlong treatments of the news media. As for the recommended diminishing of the consideration of culture, however, clear notions of French business practices, customer-client rapport and the French general

public/business community mentalities should be conveyed.

Translations should play a central role in the syllabus; proficiency in translating is often crucial for obtaining entry-level positions. But translations need direction. They should be practical: practical for the present as a means for vocabulary enrichment, for awareness of cultural differences, for acquiring report- and letter-writing skills and for learning stylistics. Translations should be practical for the future by providing the student with realistic and serviceable terminology, methods and techniques. The texts of Bénouis[4] and Cummins[5] can be particularly helpful toward these goals.

The second category deals with areas which play a capital role in French business and should, therefore, receive more extensive study. Most of these areas are already wisely included and well treated in Business French texts.

I would suggest first of all advertising and marketing. Although these go hand in hand in the United States, this is more the exception in France. As an example, I pose the question: how many French products does one find promoted throughout the United States?[6] Once we have mentioned le Car, clothes, wine, cheese, perfume, a few kitchen utensils and Perrier, we have just about said it all, despite the favorable position even now of the franc against the dollar. Salaries, fringe benefits and social advantages in France provide one explanation: they make goods imported from France decidedly more costly. Those who have purchased books or cheese abroad know how well the Atlantic trip occasions an additional, even exorbitant mark-up. And there is a lingering suspicion that many a French business still waits for the world to beat a path to its doorstep. Rare in the United States are billboards which announce French products. Ferrandon and Waquet, expressing concern over the insufficiencies of French products on the world market, say that French industry is not "assez mondialisée" and refer specifically to France's traditional weak-

nesses in the American market.[7] The French government's campaign ("un pays qui sait vendre est sûr de produire"[8]) reflects the remarks of Ferrandon and Waquet.

Instructors in Business French who advise students can underscore the advantages which exist in France: an energetic student will find there a virtually untapped gold mine.

Equally important is a knowledge of French banking (institution, system, practice) and of its special vocabulary. Both the Bénouis text (48-60) and that of Mauger and Charon provide excellent material.[9] Furthermore, students should be aware of bureaucracy's role in the public and private sectors in France. Deeply rooted in French tradition, it hardly increases efficiency. This, too, is a weakness in French business practice which a newly-arrived American in Paris can use to advantage.

Of great importance is the students' receiving a clear knowledge of the French general public/business community mentalities. Although in the plural, the two --general public and business community--can, in fact, be considered as one. Up to the present, a great many French people "trust the man who wears the star." Of course, strict consumer-protection laws regarding pricing, posting of prices and ingredients exist. There are also consumer-oriented organizations and publications. But neither price, composition nor consumer group presents an obstacle to sales; in fact, less than five percent of the total population show interest in consumer-protection efforts. Any sales territory where the customer is not inclined to shop around becomes a business-community paradise.

An examination of the Common Market implies a study of most of the nations of Western Europe; thus, it need not receive an in-depth treatment in a Business French course. Nonetheless, since the future of the French economy is closely tied to the future of the C.E.E., the European Community merits consideration. Students should have a general notion about the Common Market's history, monetary system,

strengths, weakness, successes and failures. Another factor is that in international trade a strong C.E.E. presents a strong competitor to American business. Deserving some discussion are the internecine disputes (such as the accusation that Italy was dumping wine in France, British demands for a reduction in assessments, refusals by France and Germany to accept budgets imposed by the C.E.E. and France's insistence last April that member-nations' currencies be realigned) as well as problems occasioned by the European Community on non-member nations (such as American objections that Common Market countries were dumping steel in the United States).

A knowledge of customs duties is important. Duties exacted play a great role in determining whether a product can be profitably marketed in another country. An American with a business firm in France should be familiar with import fees on goods brought into France as well as with those nations with which France has free trade agreements. In addition, a consideration of French customs policies provides the student with a better understanding of government's role in international trade and with a familiarity with the battery of French government customs declaration forms.

Not unlike the United States political system, that in France is largely determined by particular economic concerns. Despite the presence of an entire range of political parties, there are--with the union of the Right and the still-strong Socialist Party--two parties with distinctly different economic orientations. The necessity of treating both of these major political groups becomes clear when one considers the enormous influence of a leftist or rightist government on business.

Capitalism and legislation in France have had a most happy relationship. French capitalism is often dated from the French Revolution or Colbert or Etienne Marcel or guilds in the Middle Ages, but it did not flower until the reign of Louis-Philippe (1830-1848). With only occasional interruptions since that time, capitalism and legislation have largely been one and the same. Witness, for example, the

bakery of Lyon and FNAC: two businesses accused of introducing, contrary to law, competition into the market place. But indications that change may be in the winds are shown by Edmond Leclerc, who reduced gasoline prices, by his maverick brother, Michel, who underpriced (and therefore enraged) the French funeral directors, and by the union of the Right whose recent pre-election platform called for more competition. Business French students should be aware of such laws which favor one economic sector over others, of the average French person's quiet acceptance of such legislation and of possibilities of capitalizing on such legislation's strengths and weaknesses.

Finally in this second category, the Business French course should provide a thorough grounding in written and oral practice. Just as important as business and social correspondence is business and social conversation: thus, oral practice should include telephone conversations, the business lunch and other social amenities. Body language is also important. Whenever possible, the effort should be made to convey to the students the usual French forms of non-verbal communication. This can best be accomplished by means of segments from French films or from videotapes of French telecasts.[10]

Most of the third category suggests areas which might be added to the syllabus. It stems from a recent, heretofore rarely seen initiative in the French business community, from an awakening consumer awareness, and from technological research and the use of technological advances in France. This has not yet appeared in small businesses, but the increasing aggressiveness in the French business community underscores the need to treat current wholesale and retail merchandising, pricing practices and information systems, particularly the computer and satellites. Furthermore, if up to the present the French consumer has been almost a silent partner in anti-competition legislation and unquestioning product acceptance, here, too, all is no longer the same. Consumer behavior is changing; the French consumer shows signs of being a sleeping giant. Although the first of

France's extant consumer groups was founded in 1912 and the movement is far from being being a mighty force, there are now 20 national consumer organizations. The largest of them, which publishes the monthly Le Coopérateur de France, has a membership of more than two million families.[11] This implies that Business French students should be aware of product quality in France, of chemical additives in foodstuffs and of environmental issues, such as pollution (clean air and water, reduced noise) and occupational health and safety.

An overview of labor-management relations and of the French labor movement should be provided: politico-economic pholosophies, accomplishments, weaknesses.[12]

As noted above, ancillary materials should be incorporated into the class text. The first element should be French-language newspapers and magazines. The reading material need not be geared primarily to the financial district, provided that it give sufficient coverage of business activities and that it be appropriate for the level of the students. Moreover, it is recommended that the instructor have access to the major financial newspapers and magazines. With these the instructor will be able to keep the students abreast of the latest economic developments in France.[13]

For additional materials development, the instructor can scour France for the many and varied business forms which our students will later confront in France. If unable to go abroad, the instructor will find many of these forms in Business French texts: from writing checks and mailing packages to the export license and bill of lading.[14]

Since most instructors of commercial FL courses are trained in languages, linguistics, literature or pedagogy, their feelings of inadequacy in a business course must be addressed.

It remains to be proved that a commercial FL instructor cannot conduct well a business-language course. Nonetheless, since such an instructor is outside his

or her domain, the tendency to exaggerate deficiencies is entirely reasonable. Unless individual steps are taken to acquire expertise in business, the instructor can only become more unsure and, in time, overdependent on the course text. The failure to self-improve in this area is anything but pedagogically salutary. Insecurity, lack of creativity, stultification will eventually reign; the instructor's initial enthusiasm for the course will vanish.

The finest solutions come from France where courses are provided for those who teach Business French outside of France.[15] Scholarly journals and publications which are Business French-specific (such as Gestion) and FL-specific (such as the Journal of Language for International Business) as well as non-commercial FL-specific (such as Foreign Language Annals, Le Français dans le monde [see note 13] , French Review and Modern Language Review) can be particularly helpful. But not everyone can spend summers in Paris or Lyon and articles in scholarly journals --while valuable--provide insights, not depth. An answer would be for Americans conversant with French business and business practice to offer national and/or regional workshops modeled on coursework at the CCIP or the Ecole supérieure de Commerce de Lyon.

Since the line of demarcation between business and non-business is more a question of terminology and mentality, private study could provide that which the instructor needs. In addition, the instructor should take advantage of all social contacts with friends in commerce; this is an invaluable source for acquiring knowledge about the businessperson's thinking pattern and goals. An additional and practical step would be for the commercial FL instructor to take basic courses in business, marketing and economics at his or her institution. Most important--and easiest for the instructor with a humanities background--is always to keep the global picture in mind without overlooking details. We are dealing here with a definite need, and it is less a need of FL departments than of students and business; furthermore, judging from statements by those in government, it is a national

need.[16]

By taking steps against problems arising from text obsolescence, the tendency to let the text design the course and feelings of inadequacy, the commercial FL instructor will conduct a better class. Such measures are pedagogically sound, self-enriching and interest creating. Furthermore, the instructor will recognize that, far from interfering in what is outside of his or her area of specialization, an inestimable service is made to students, commerce and country.

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Notes

[1] See Townsend W. Bowling, "The Certificat Pratique Oral Examination: Format, Content, Grading," French Review 59 (1985): 185-97.

[2] Marianne Inman, "Bilingualism in Business: Past, Present & Future," ERIC/CLL News Bulletin 9.2 (1986): 3.

[3] Irène Finel-Honigman, "Rationale, Structure and Methodology of a French Language Program for American Bankers and Traders," Foreign Language Annals 19.1 (1986): 30.

[4] Mustapha K. Bénouis, Le Français économique et commercial (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

[5] Patricia W. Cummins, Commercial French (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982).

[6] It should be noted that French technology in heavy equipment and machinery is advanced as well as agressively and successfully marketed in the United States.

[7] Marie-Christine Ferrandon et Isabelle Waquet, La France depuis 1945 (Paris: Hatier--Collection Profil, 1979) 47.

[8] "A nation which knows how to sell is certain to produce."

[9] Gaston Mauger et Jacqueline Charon, Le Français commercial: manuel (Paris: Larousse, 1975) 1: 242-51.

[10] For a brief but worthwhile treatment of the verbal and non-verbal elements in French conversation, cf. also Richard Lescure, "Compétence de communication et mimiques," Le Français dans le monde 190 (1985): 62-64.

[11] The mounting circulation rate illustrates the awakening consumer interest in France. At the end of 1950, the press run was 172,000; at the end of 1982, 690,630. Additional precisions regarding the magazine are available at Le Coopérateur de France, 27-33, quai le Gallo, 92517 Boulogne-Billancourt Cédex, France.

[12] Cf. J.-C. Beacco et S. Lieutaud, Tours de France: travaux pratiques de civilisation (Paris: Hachette, 1985) 110-13; Max Dany, Anne Reberioux et Ivan de Renty, Le Français des hommes d'affaires (Paris: Hachette--Collection Le Français et la profession, 1975), 51-53; and Eric Bimbenet, "Quel Syndicalisme en France?" Le Français dans le monde 191 (1985): 58-64.

[13] Pedagogical journals should not be overlooked. Le Français dans le monde (hereafter referred to as FdM) has among its main objectives the formation and perfecting of French instructors who are outside of France. Cf. the following: Jean-Marie Fèvre, "Expérience d'enseignement de français économique et commercial," FdM

147 (1979): 51-56; Max Dany, "Le Français de l'hôtellerie et du tourisme," FdM 149 (1979): 74-80; Max Dany, "L'Enseignement du français basé sur des études de cas," FdM 168 (1982): 44-51; Max Dany et Christine Noé, "L'Enseignement du français commercial au niveau élementaire: utilisation du 'cas professionnel,' " FdM 190 (1985): 50-57; and a useful computer lexicon, "Informatique: prêt-à-porter lexical," FdM 195 (1985): 26-27.

[14] For helpful examples, cf. Bénouis (note 4), Cummins (note 5) and Mauger et Charon (note 9).

[15] Additional information can be obtained by writing to the following addresses:

Monsieur Jacques Cartier
Directeur des relations internationales: enseignement
Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris
14, rue Chateaubriand
75008 Paris

and

Robert Crane, Ph.D.
Director of Programs for North America
Ecole supérieure de Commerce de Lyon
23, avenue Guy-de-Collongue
69132 Ecully Cédex
France

[16] Cf. Paul Simon, The Tongue-tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis (New York: Continuum, 1980); and George Ryan, "Mobilizing Resources to Create Jobs in International Trade," address before the International Council of MidAmerica--Hub III, Chicago, 4 Nov. 1984; rpt., Foreign Language Annals 18.1 (1985): 73-77.